

THE
DAVIS FOUNDATION

FOR PROVIDING
EMOTIONAL COMFORT

Letter of August 25, 2004

Dear Reader,

David Brooks of the New York Times wrote recently about the “professionalization of childhood,” in which children are encouraged or forced to spend most of their time acquiring specific skills. Many children are so completely scheduled that they have very little free time. What causes parents to raise their children this way?

A parent who feels insecure about his worth or status has an ongoing disequilibrium that may be responded to in a number of ways. Some will strive to become better and better in an attempt to secure their sense of value. Others will rebel against society’s expectations. Some will try to escape their feelings of anxiety and depression by daydreaming or distracting themselves by focusing intensely on unrelated activities such as hobbies. A parent who has felt deprived may deal with this discomfort by attempting to acquire more and more material things or by masochistically denying himself available pleasures. And a parent who, himself, has been pushed to succeed may identify with the aggressor and drive himself onward or develop an inhibition that prevents him from doing so.

All of these responses, which are instigated out of awareness by the mental apparatus, are *partial solutions*. They decrease the disequilibrium but don’t end it. But because their efficacy decreases as their novelty wanes, an individual must intensify or elaborate them in order to maintain their potency. One way of elaborating a partial solution is to apply it to an expanding array of situations.

For those who drive themselves to become more accomplished or who strive to acquire more material possessions, a natural extension of these activities is to apply them to their children. Parents who feel inferior may try to attain value or status vicariously through their children’s accomplishments. And parents who have suffered deprivation may fear for their children’s security. These parents will program their children accordingly. They will try to enroll their children in the best schools and provide them with a multitude of enrichment activities and experiences. In their single-minded focus on their children’s advancement, some will even do their children’s homework assignments, losing track of the difference between appearance and achievement.

What is the experience of the child who is programmed? In a perfect environment, a child would develop knowledge, skills, and tolerance for delayed gratification by responding to stimuli that were presented at an optimal level of frequency and intensity. Knowledge would be acquired as the child satisfied her curiosity about the world around her and skills would develop as she responded to the challenges presented to her. As her parents protected her from overstimulation (too many toys, too much excitement) she might feel superficial distress but, out of awareness, comfort would be restored.



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This environment can be most fully realized when the adults around a child are responding to the child's needs rather than theirs. Parents who force-feed knowledge and activities to maintain the efficacy of their own partial solutions create chronic disequilibrium in their children. Children who show unusual talent at an early age may be programmed to focus on one skill exclusively whereas other children may be heavily scheduled with a variety of résumé-enhancing activities (sports, arts, community service, advanced placement courses).

Some children choose these paths themselves. Most who do have responded to the disequilibrium caused by their parents' expectations and pressure by the partial solution of internalizing the demand so that it becomes their own. And some have responded to other sources of disequilibrium by choice of this partial solution. In such cases it serves as a distraction. These habit patterns become locked in and the individual is unable to change them even if he wants to. A very gifted child may choose to focus intensely on his special area for healthy reasons. He may find the challenges optimally stimulating and the achievements intensely rewarding. But even he, as well as the others, needs down time. Why?

We are all bombarded with stimuli during every waking moment, stimuli to which we must respond. The mental apparatus matches each stimulus with the best possible response and many of these are, of necessity, partial rather than *true solutions*. For a problem that cannot immediately be solved, a partial solution may be to think about possible solutions. For a piece of good news, a partial solution is to replay it in one's mind until its novelty wanes. Every mind needs time for these partial solutions to express themselves. Otherwise the stress level increases and a vicious cycle ensues.

Children need time for imaginative play and periods of relaxation because their content consists of partial solutions for their disequilibriations. Adults need this time, too. It has been reported that some middle-aged adults who work non-stop from the time they wake until the time that they go to bed sometimes fall ill and die of no obvious cause. It is possible that the build-up of chronic disequilibrium becomes unsupportable over time. An Inner Guide can help a parent raise a child in the best possible emotional environment because it is aware of the child's disequilibriations and can provide the best responses for them.

QUESTION:

Can a situation that a person finds himself in ever overwhelm his Inner Guide?

ANSWER:

No. Out of awareness, the mind works extremely rapidly. An Inner Guide can access better responses for the multitude of stimuli to which we are exposed. Because it is able to work so rapidly it can't become overwhelmed.

I welcome your questions and comments, and will publish as many of them as possible. I look forward to hearing from you, either by post or at info@davis-foundation.org. If you would like to be anonymous, just let me know.

Cordially,

Judith M. Davis

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